The story of English grammar in United States schools

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ABSTRACT: This article assumes the value of a scientifically grounded, rhetorically focused, professionally supported, and publicly embraced grammar within the public schools and examines the past century of practices within the United States from that perspective. It describes a brief renaissance in the 50's and early 60's, inspired largely by the structural grammar of C. C Fries, and examines the confluence of forces that brought that budding change to an abrupt close – the ascendancy of generative grammar, NCTE policy, including the 1963 Braddock report and the 1986 Hillocks update, whole language approaches to language acquisition, the ascendancy of process approaches within composition, the primacy of literature within English curriculums at all levels, minimalist grammar and its anti-knowledge stance, political pressures against the imposition of an elitist language, a general lack of preparation for those in the teaching profession, and a general public failure to recognize grammar as anything but a loose collection of prescriptive mandates. The authors describe the various factions currently allied against grammar, though often at odds with each other. They describe current pressures for change, including a more widespread recognition that ignoring grammar has been a failure and articulate concerns about highly reductive testing practices in the absence of a more sophisticated curriculum. They describe the shape a successful reintegration of grammar would have to take to accommodate the concerns of those currently opposed.

KEYWORDS: Structural linguistics, descriptive grammar, grammar curriculum, teacher education, anti-grammar policy, process writing.

PART I: THE WINDS OF CHANGE (MARTHA KOLLN)

A long overdue revolution is at present taking place in the study of English grammar – a revolution as sweeping in its consequences as the Darwinian revolution in biology.

W. Nelson Francis, "Revolution in Grammar", 1954, (p. 46).

Leadership in the National Council of Teachers of English....has in one way or another created a growing ferment of interest in the potential utility of structural linguistics in the teaching of English.

Harold B. Allen, Readings in Applied English Linguistics, 1958, (p. ix).

In 1954, when W. Nelson Francis declared structural linguistics to be a revolution, he could not have known that another revolution was already gathering on the horizon. And in 1958, when Harold B. Allen collected his "readings," 65 recent articles on the topics of

grammar and applied linguistics, including the "revolution" article by Francis, he could not have foreseen that the "growing ferment of interest" in linguistic education would be swept aside by stronger forces in little more than a decade.

In looking back from our vantage point in the Twenty-First century, at a time when grammar remains outside of NCTE's inner circle and structural grammar is completely absent from K-12 textbooks, it's hard to imagine the wealth of material, much of it from NCTE publications, that Allen had to choose from in putting together his book of readings: 65 articles (in addition to 24 others considered and rejected), most of them published between 1950 and 1956. When grammar finds its way into NCTE journals today, it is presented not as a topic for discussion but rather as an issue to be debated. What happened to change the outlook for thoughtful language study that appeared so promising to Professor Allen fifty years ago? What happened in those intervening years that would justify this description of the classroom setting for grammar that future teachers would read in one of their education textbooks in 1991?

Over the years, *grammar* has probably generated more discussion, debate, acrimony, and maybe even fistfights than any other component of the English/language arts curriculum (Tchudi & Tchudi, 1991, p. 164.)

We can learn a great deal about our profession's history from the "readings" in Professor Allen's collection. Many of the discipline's pioneers are represented in its pages, among them C. C. Fries, Leonard Bloomfield, Karl Dykema, James Sledd, Albert Markwardt, Raven I. McDavid, Francis Christensen, Paul Roberts, Archibald Hill, Donald Lloyd. The new discipline of applied linguistics was just beginning to make an impact on textbooks and teacher training in the 1950s. Future teachers were learning the utility of structural linguistics with C. C. Fries's seminal work, *The Structure of English*, in which he describes the categories of English on its own terms, rather than on the categories of Latin; they were studying phonology and morphology with *An Outline of English Structure* by George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr. Secondary students were learning the principles of structural grammar from Paul Roberts's *Patterns of English*, based on the work of Fries. Clearly, the decade of the 1950s held promise as a watershed period, a turning point, for the new enterprise of structural grammar. The "long overdue revolution" that Professor Francis predicted in 1954 was on the move and would be making headway for another ten years before almost disappearing.

The century's brightest star in the field of linguistics, whose name is missing from the list of contributors, is, of course, Noam Chomsky. It was 1957 – Allen's *Readings* was probably "in press" at that time – when Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* exploded onto the linguistic scene. And by 1965, when his expanded *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* made its appearance, both structural grammar and the traditional "school" variety were beginning to feel the winds of change. Indeed, the whole enterprise of grammar as an integral part of the curriculum was under a cloud.

But doubts about the teaching of grammar and its place in the curriculum were by no means new: There had been revolutions in the wind before the 1960s. The Commission on English (1965) reported that "winds of revolutionary doctrine began to blow...shortly

before World War I with empirical demonstrations that traditional grammar, as conventionally taught, had relatively little effect on writing and was of negligible value in improving oral usage" (p. 20). The convention of the time was to teach and enforce correct usage. But standards of correctness were also under scrutiny at that time with the monographs of Sterling A. Leonard and C. C. Fries, which demonstrated that usage is dynamic rather than stable, and that "even at a given time, it is not uniform for all its educated users" (p. 20). It should be noted that throughout the history of grammar teaching, as far back as Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, published in 1762 – and in handbooks up to the present time – usage and grammar have been seen as synonymous. According to Sledd (1959), "Lowth's characteristic technique was to teach what is right be showing what is wrong" (p. 3).

However, the "language" strand of the English curriculum has never been easy to describe or to assess, as Gleason (1965) explained:

The place of grammar in the curriculum varied from school to school, and even from classroom to classroom. It had been practically eliminated from a few schools and drastically cut in some others. It remained strong in most. Indeed, in some it was clearly the dominant element in the English curriculum, receiving more attention that either literature or composition, or even than both together. Even today for many English teachers, the purpose for including grammar lessons is restricted to error correction and error avoidance (p. 11).

Research to measure the success of grammar in the curriculum began early in the Twentieth Century, when educational research was getting underway:

One of the characteristic movements affecting the schools in this century has been educational research, the statistical study of curriculum, materials, methods, and so on, against certain measurable criteria of usefulness. This has become a standard way of approaching any educational problem. Experiment, evaluation, and statistical interpretation have become familiar devices to every curriculum specialist.

It has usually been assumed that a major purpose of English instruction was to teach "good," "error-free" language. The success of grammar teaching could be measured against this. Grammar might be justified if it could help in preventing "errors" in writing, or if it could contribute in any other way to composing ability (Gleason, 1965, p. 13).

A study conducted by Hoyt in 1906 and replicated by Rapeer in 1913 questioned the place that formal grammar study occupied in the elementary school curriculum, mainly because of what was known about children's psychological development. Influenced by Thorndike's research into learning, Hoyt considered the mental exercise of classification and parsing and grouping of words ill-adapted to immature pupils. Both Hoyt and Rapeer emphasized the need to evaluate the amount of time devoted to formal grammar study in an overcrowded curriculum, when the schools had to provide "the whole range of vocational, hygienic, and socializing training needed by our 'nation of sixth graders'" (Kolln, 1981, p. 143). However, as Braddock et al (1963) concluded in *Research in Written Composition* (1963), early research in composition and grammar was not highly developed; in fact, the authors compared it "to chemical research as it emerged from the

period of alchemy" (p. 5). Both the design and the conclusions of the Hoyt and Rapeer studies, along with five others studies carried out between 1923 and 1961, have been called into question (Kolln, 1981).

In 1935, under pressure from educators, the NCTE appointed a committee to look into the role of grammar and to make recommendations for the curriculum. The result was a program called *An Experience Curriculum in English*, which recommended that grammar be taught in connection with writing, rather than as an isolated unit of study. This recommendation was by no means a minimalist approach to grammar in context – nor did it emphasize the "teachable moment" for correcting errors. On the contrary, the Experience Curriculum set out a systematic program of study, with ten primary objectives to be introduced in Grades Two through Six, objectives having to do with sentence sense, with preventing fragments and run-ons, with providing sentence variety by means of compound predicates, adverbial and relative clauses. The program lists fifteen other primary objectives for Grades Seven through Twelve, including verbs, the concept of case, meanings of tenses, appositives – even the subjunctive mood. Along with these primary objectives were parallel "enabling objectives," suggestions to the teacher for introducing these concepts.

Apparently the recommendations were not universally well received – not because the program laid out a systematic plan for grammar, but because it substituted this kind of functional grammar for the formal method that teachers were used to. Two months after the report was published, Wilbur Hatfield, Chair of the Committee and the Editor of *English Journal*, answered the critics. The following is an excerpt from his editorial in the January 1936 issue:

First, it must be pointed out that this recommendation is not so radical as it sounds. Actually *An Experience Curriculum in English* lists 24 items of grammar to be taught, and these include practically all the grammar of function ever taught in the schools. The grammar of classification is, of course, omitted....All the basic conceptions of the parts of a sentence, of the parts of speech, of concord, and of case appear in the list (pp. 65-66).

It is clear that Hatfield's argument was not convincing. And while research studies continued to discredit formal grammar taught in isolation, the suggestions for teaching grammar using functional methods laid out by the *Experience Curriculum* were never implemented

Nothing changed in K-12 classrooms and college, teacher-training classrooms until Fries's structural linguistics of the 1950s and Chomsky's generative-transformational grammar of the 1960s came on the scene. By then, the profession was ripe for new ideas; both the English-teaching establishment and textbook publishers took an interest. The NCTE convention program of 1963 offers evidence that the "growing ferment of interest in the potential utility of structural grammar" that Professor Allen described – and interest in generative grammar as well – was in full swing. The program lists twenty different sessions on language, which was one of four general areas, with 50 individual papers. (The other three areas were literature, composing and curriculum.) Titles of the language sessions included Semantics, Structural Linguistics for the Junior High School,

Generative Grammar, Some Creative Approaches to Grammar, and the Relationship of Grammar to Composition. Among the speakers were Neil Postman, Roderick Jacobs, John Mellon, Leonard Newmark, James McCrimmon, and S. I. Hayakawa. Some of the other sequences also included language-related sessions. In the "composing" sequence, for example, Josephine Miles spoke on "Grammar in Prose Composition". There is no question that in 1963 grammar occupied a place in NCTE's inner circle – new grammar was being tried out, looked at, experimented with. With high hopes!

However, the enthusiasm would not last. Storm clouds were gathering on several fronts. One of those clouds was none other than transformational grammar itself. As soon as generative-transformational theory came on the scene, the descriptive methodology of structural linguistics was overshadowed. Chomsky, of course, had made clear right from the start that his theory was not intended as pedagogy. But that didn't matter. Phrase-structure rules and transformational formulas made their way into textbooks _ happily, not many. Teachers were ill-prepared for grammatical explanations that looked more like mathematics than grammar. The rejection of transformational grammar spelled the rejection of the other "new grammar" as well. Popular traditional grammar books such as Warriner's stayed with the Latin-based, eight parts of speech — and they continue to do so to this day. The sensible ideas, the promise of the structuralists have been all but forgotten.

In 1963, the same year that NCTE convention-goers were hearing the enthusiasm for new grammar in those fifty presentations, the NCTE published an anti-grammar statement that turned into a storm surge of hurricane strength – a statement that continues to inform the profession's negative grammar philosophy. *Research in Written Composition* by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, mentioned earlier in connection with grammar research, gave us the unfortunate but quotable noun phrase "a harmful effect." And the sentence that contains it still continues to be cited, over forty years later, as evidence against the teaching of grammar:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing (p. 37).

The purpose of the report was to "review what is known and what is not known about the teaching and learning of composition and the conditions under which it is taught" (p. 1). The authors examined 485 research studies. They discovered, in a nutshell, that the research in English composition was "not highly developed". The field, as a whole, they said, was "laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations" (p. 5).

Braddock et al. chose five studies to report in detail – the best of the lot in each of five areas – the studies they called the "most soundly based." The grammar study they chose was an experiment by Roland Harris carried out in London over a two-year period, which, unfortunately, used the term "harmful" in its conclusion: the "harmful effect on the *correctness* of children's writing." Although the evaluations were based on writing,

pre- and post-essays, the essays were not scored holistically nor were they rated for effectiveness; they were scored on the basis of errors and numbers. Numbers of spelling errors and comma splices were tallied; numbers of words, numbers of subordinate clauses and such were tallied. Clearly, such a scoring method would never pass muster today. Two serious critiques of the Harris study have been published, by Mellon (1977) and Tomlinson (1994). Unfortunately, neither has been cited in the ensuing debate about the so-called harmful effect of grammar.

Both critiques point out serious flaws that essentially invalidate both Harris's conclusions and the concept of "harmful effects on the improvement of writing" reported by Braddock et al. Given the fact that Hudson and Walmsley (2005), in their discussion of the British grammar curriculum – "The English Patient": English Grammar and Teaching in the Twentieth Century" – make no mention of Harris's 1961 research study in the schools of London, we can assume it had no consequences for the teaching of grammar in England. Yet on this side of the Atlantic, one sentence in the discussion of that study – two words, in fact – set in motion the anti-grammar policy that has dominated the American English curriculum for forty years.

The Harris study was by far the strongest influence in this perfect storm that overtook grammar, but there were others. Another was the publication of *Growth Through English* by John D. Dixon (1967). This report grew out of a month-long, Anglo-American seminar on the teaching of English held at Dartmouth College in 1966, the seminar that gave rise to the "learner-centered" view of education. This view, later popularized by Peter Elbow and others, celebrated and encouraged students' personal expression. It introduced such concepts as free writing, journal writing and peer review, all of which became part of the writing process. This philosophy could not have been further from the traditional, teacher-centered classroom, in which students are seen as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge.

The student-centered classroom certainly had no room for the kind of normative grammar instruction of traditional textbooks and classrooms. In *Writing with Power*, Elbow made it clear that grammar interferes with writing:

Learning grammar is a formidable task that takes crucial energy away from working on your writing, and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing: it heightens your preoccupation with mistakes as you write out each word and phrase, and makes it almost impossible to achieve that undistracted attention to your *thoughts* and *experiences* as you write that is so crucial for strong writing (and sanity). For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar (p. 169).

The writing process was at the heart of the student-centered composition class, where the product was de-emphasized, along with a de-emphasis on correctness and a further rejection of skills-based teaching. Since traditional grammar instruction had been associated with learning parts of speech and their place in the sentence, as well as error correction and error avoidance, its absence was not missed when the new emphasis was shifted to process. In college classrooms, and in secondary schools as well, this move away from what are called current-traditional methods of teaching composition has been

an important development – a revolution of sorts – in composition studies. Any instruction in mechanics and usage is limited to the final editing stage in the process.

What might be called the anti-elitist philosophy constitutes another storm cloud that intensified NCTE's anti-grammar policy. In 1968, NCTE passed a resolution voicing concerns about the neglect of the language needs of non-standard dialect speakers. And while the official statements focused on the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of these students, including the need to teach edited English, teachers were also encouraged to recognize the legitimacy of the home-language dialects in their classrooms. Because traditional school grammar had historically been based on normative rules and the standards of edited English, these traditions, which appeared to promote one "correct" way for every rule and pronunciation, could easily be dismissed as elitist. Even terms like "standard English" were seen as an affront to students whose home language deviated from that so-called standard.

This anti-elitist effort came about in part as a response to the "back to the basics" movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which public concern was being voiced about student achievement. The NCTE's response can be found in a SLATE document entitled "Back to the Basics: Grammar and Usage" (NCTE, n.d. {1}). The document is one of a series of so-called "Starter Sheets," from Support for Learning and Teaching of English, NCTE's intellectual freedom network, which are labeled "resources for dealing with current issues affecting the teaching of English". This particular SLATE document quotes the NCTE Commission on Composition, which recognizes "the importance of the study of the structure of language as a valuable asset to a liberal education" (¶4). It goes on to say that such study is not to be "an instrument for presenting the grammar of a particular dialect as right or pure or logical or better than others" (¶4). A later paragraph reports that "[m]any English teachers. . . feel a responsibility to reject approaches to grammar and usage study that support the linguistic imperialism of prescriptive 'school grammars'" (¶6) Written in the mid-1970s, this Starter Sheet states the NCTE's position toward the new grammar as well: "The most accurate descriptions of grammatical structure – if, indeed, abstract knowledge of grammar is to be emphasized – are found in generative grammar and generative semantics" (96). While clearly out of date in many respects, this starter sheet is available on the NCTE website and continues to represent the organizations' policy on grammar and usage. The lingering concept of "linguistic imperialism" remains an impediment in reestablishing grammar in the curriculum.

By 1980, the respected position that grammar had once occupied was no longer recognized by NCTE. The calls for proposals for both 4Cs (The Conference on College Communication and Composition, an affiliate organization of NCTE) and NCTE conferences, which listed a wide array of possible topics, no longer included a listing for topics such as language or linguistics or language structure – and certainly not for grammar. The decade of the eighties also produced the following resolution, which was passed by NCTE convention-goers in 1985:

Background: This resolution was prompted by the continuing use of repetitive grammar drills and exercises in the teaching of English in many schools. Proposers pointed out that the ample evidence from 50 years of research has shown the teaching of grammar in

isolation does not lead to improvement in students' speaking and writing, and that in fact, it hinders development of students' oral and written language.

It is clear from this background statement that the functional grammar approach, proposed by the *Experience Curriculum*, in the 1930s, had no status. Here is the resolution that it led to:

Resolved, that the NCTE affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing and that, in order to improve both of these, class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction.

Notice that teaching grammar in isolation doesn't simply use up time better spent in other pursuits. It now "hinders development of students' oral and written language". The most amazing part of the statement is the final phrase, which essentially says that the teaching of grammar does not fall under the rubric of English language arts instruction: "the teaching of grammar *rather than* English language arts instruction".

Two books on NCTE's publications list support the anti-grammar policy. Both have kept the storm winds blowing. The first is Constance Weaver's *Grammar for Teachers*, published in 1979, with its philosophy of grammar for teachers only, not for students. Especially troublesome is Weaver's misreading of the 1935 *Experience Curriculum*, which, she claims, argues "against the teaching of grammar per se" (p. 5). She then goes on to make the case for indirect rather than direct instruction. The second book is George Hillocks's update of the Braddock report, *Research on Written Composition*, which was added to the list in 1986, the year after the anti-grammar resolution. Educators who look for curriculum guidance will get no encouragement to include grammar: "School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing" (p. 248).

While it is true that Hillocks specifies "traditional school grammar", that, of course, is what *grammar* means to the masses – and, despite definitions to the contrary, will probably continue to do so. Back in 1954, Professor Nelson Francis had attempted to set the record straight; in fact, his "revolution" article, quoted at the opening of this paper, is mainly remembered for his three definitions of grammar:

- Grammar 1: "the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings";
- Grammar 2: "the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulization of formal language patterns";
- Grammar 3: "linguistic etiquette".

In 1985, Patrick Hartwell added to the list by separating Francis's Grammar 2 into two categories, which he called "school grammar" and "scientific grammar"; and he added a fifth definition, "stylistic grammar," which includes the teaching of sentence combining and other stylistic techniques.

Unfortunately, the conversation about grammar, in all of its definitions, simply disappeared from NCTE journals and convention programs in the 1970s and 1980s. Allen's 1958 book of readings, quoted in the opening, testifies to the conversation that had been taking place in mid-century. But that momentum simply came to a halt; the discussion was over. And while many classroom teachers continued to teach grammar, often behind closed doors, there were many school districts that simply removed it from the curriculum. As a result, several generations of students have had no instruction in the parts of speech and sentence structure, neither in the language of traditional grammar nor in the new language of structural linguistics. In 1993 – three decades after the Braddock report with its "harmful effect" stigma – any teacher who had hoped to learn about grammar at NCTE's national convention in Pittsburgh surely went home disappointed. Out of some 340 sessions, and well over 1,000 individual presentations, not a single one was devoted to language structure or linguistics. In contrast to the 1963 NCTE convention program mentioned earlier, with its fifty separate presentations on old and new grammar, in 1993 the word grammar appeared only once in that thick program – and that one was a mockery: "Getting beyond grammar."

The cost to English education of the NCTE anti-grammar policy is impossible to The policy has affected more than the K-12 curriculum itself; equally important, has been the negative effect on teacher education. The strides that linguistics has made during the past several decades has almost completely eluded the prospective English teacher. Rarely does an English or education major's program call for more than one or two courses having to do with language – possibly a class that includes the history of English and/or an introduction to linguistics. But many teacher-training programs certify secondary English teachers without the students having had a single course in modern grammar. And it's certainly possible that these new teachers had little or no grammar instruction in their own middle-school and high-school experiences. Professor Allen must have been disappointed, indeed, to see the direction that teacher education was taking after 1957, when he commented on that "growing ferment of interest in the potential utility of structural linguistics in the teaching of English". He must have wondered, as do many of us, how teachers with little if any grammar education can be expected to teach reading and writing, let alone discuss the social implications of language in our lives.

A recent impetus for including grammar study in the K-12 curriculum has been the institution by various states of fairly rigorous curriculum standards, in some cases followed up by statewide testing. The national program for testing schools, *No Child Left Behind*, has contributed another reason for schools to re-examine their curriculum. And the new SAT has begun testing grammatical structures in context and requiring a timed essay. All of these programs are bound to have an impact on education, including

grammar education, in the years to come, both for students – elementary through college – and for teacher training.

In 1989, the NCTE's anti-grammar policy inspired a small group of teachers to organize an interest group, a group that is now an official assembly of NCTE: The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG). The group meets yearly in a summer conference and holds an annual meeting at the NCTE conference. ATEG also publishes a quarterly journal. The NCTE has begun to take ATEG's pro-grammar message seriously; recent NCTE national conferences have included sessions and workshops on grammar. Two issues of *English Journal* (November 1996 and January 2003), the NCTE publication for secondary teachers, have focused on the teaching of grammar. In 2003, NCTE also published a book written by ATEG members: *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers*. And in 2004, NCTE marketed a collection of grammar materials, mainly reprints of articles that have appeared in the past few years in *English Journal* and *Language Arts*, their secondary and elementary level journals. Perhaps these moves can be taken to mean that the NCTE position on the importance of grammar is undergoing change.

Meanwhile, however, the official position on teaching grammar, which can be found on the NCTE website, counters a great deal of that optimism for change. The SLATE Fact Sheet Series: Starter Sheet #3, "On the Teaching of Grammar," written by Constance Weaver, opens by quoting a sentence from a 1991 article by Hillocks and Smith: "Research over a period of nearly 90 years has consistently shown that the teaching of school grammar has little or no effect on students" (NCTE, n.d {2}, epigraph). The first two sections, "Background" and "What doesn't work: the research", repeat selected "harmful" passages: "Relatively few students learn grammar well, fewer retain it, and still fewer transfer the grammar they have learned to improving or editing their writing." The section on "Implications for teaching grammar as an aid to writing" make clear that "grammar in context" is the solution: "Teach only the grammatical concepts that are critically needed for editing writing, and teach these concepts and terms mostly through mini-lessons and conferences, while helping students edit" (NCTE, n.d {2}, "Implications", ¶1).

Until grammar is seen as a legitimate part of the Language Arts curriculum that goes beyond an aid to writing, until the advocates for teaching grammar in a systematic way are invited into the NCTE inner circle, until the conversation begins again, our students and our teachers in training will miss out on the subject that remains the most humanistic of the humanities and the most social of the social sciences.

PART II: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE (CRAIG HANCOCK)

Part of the pleasure in reading the Hudson & Walmsley (2005) article, "The English Patient: English Grammar and Teaching in the Twentieth Century" is the pleasure of shared assumptions, especially since these are not mainstream assumptions Stateside. We Americans do not have a national curriculum and do not have a consensus for the

establishment of one. Rather than a narrative about the rise and fall and revival of grammar, we can only offer an account of the fall and include current symptoms of, and current work towards, an impending revival. If we are headed in the same direction, then we are doing so ten or twenty years behind. One advantage to that might be that we can learn from what we observe and save ourselves some growing pains as we develop a program appropriate to our own situation. Any program, though, would need to address the concerns of the various factions that now make a consensus so difficult.

As with any other tool, language is more effective the better it is understood, so we take it for granted that school-leavers should understand how language works....our view is that the understanding must include some of the technicalities of grammar – language for talking about language – as well as more general ideas about language variation and use (Hudson & Walmsley).¹

If this were, indeed, a consensus Stateside, it would bring about radical changes in curriculum and policy, as it has in England, but we are certainly not there yet. As in England, "The expulsion of grammar teaching ushered in a period in which an informed understanding of language and an appropriate metalanguage with which to discuss it were systematically eradicated from the state school system" (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, pp. 605-606). For us, it is not just historically true, but currently true that many US English teachers are "happy to go on record as knowing nothing whatsoever about the grammar of their native language" (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, pp. 605-606). As in Hudson and Walmsley's account of the situation in England, it is certainly possible to think of this as a sort of informal experiment carried out on a national scale — and an experiment that failed. But that is not a consensus position here. To the extent that we share a widespread disenchantment, we don't share a consensus about what is wrong or what is causing our current problems.

It may simply be that the US is too deeply factionalized for this sort of consensus to occur, and the continuation of problems within the school system (our failure to accomplish varying notions of what we mean by literacy) is too easily blamed on failures within other camps. Perhaps we haven't drilled enough or perhaps we have drilled too much. We didn't do enough interesting reading. We didn't do enough drills. We have yet to achieve equitable funding within our inner city school systems. We have failed to demand accountability in the over-funded school systems. Students aren't being allowed to use their own home language. Students are getting away with using their own home language. We give too much attention to grammar. We don't give enough. And so on. We don't have a consensus of opinion that the explicit teaching of grammar would help remediate current failures, however much we might agree that Johnny can't read or Johnny can't write – on the reality of the failure.

It is a pleasure too to accept another assumption of Hudson and Walmsley's article, that grammar being taught should not be a return to the older, dysfunctional, error-focused,

¹ This particular quotation comes from an earlier draft of the Hudson and Walmsley (2005) article, which was made available to contributors to this issue and was also for a time available as a download on Dick Hudson's own website.

Latin-based school grammar, but a grammar deeply informed by a disciplined study of language. Here, too, we have similar complicity on both sides, English teachers and linguists, for a failure to reach across the divides of our disciplines. One major exception to that have been ATEG (Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, a sub-group of NCTE) and NPG (New Public Grammar, a group formed to promote and develop a new public grammar through the cooperative effort of linguists and English teachers). These are relatively small groups, working in relative obscurity with little fanfare or recognition. Most importantly, they are groups in which linguists and English teachers have been talking, however awkwardly, to each other.

As in England, we can trace back some of the problem to the ascendancy of literature instruction to the top of the English discipline. If we take the Sixties as the point of reference, literature was certainly thought of as a deeply humanizing activity. dominant critical approach of that decade was New Critical and Formalist, which at least advocated a close look at the dynamics of a text. A common New Critical perspective was that a text exists independently of its rhetorical context, that it cannot be reduced to its author's intentions, its various interpretations, or even its mirroring of an outside world. But the underlying assumption was always that these canonical texts were among the greatest legacies of civilization, and mining their wisdom was a way of civilizing sensibilities and cultivating humanized adults. There was considerable attention to form and language within this tradition (image patterns, for example, or plot structure, or shades and kinds of irony), though this was an attention that seemed to owe very little to the discipline of linguistics. In the light of disciplinary battles that followed, this was a period of unusual harmony and unity within the field, and it did not, in any serious way, make for a common ground with linguistics. If grammar was attended to or tolerated, it was a traditional grammar for the most part, and the expectation was that this was to have been taken care of in grammar school, that attention to grammar at the college level would be essentially remedial. Though generative/transformational grammar was in vogue for a short time, pedagogical applications were not particularly successful.

If we were to look at an English department thirty years later, however, we would find that the old consensus had been lost. Critical Theory not only challenged the old, disinterested, humanist approaches, but established a somewhat contentious ground for its own importance. We no longer easily accept the fact that there is or should be a monolithic, central culture or a received wisdom embodied in the canon. Previously canonized texts can be read as manifestations of a sexist, racist, or repressive culture. Rather than simply describe the text in a detached way, we try to place it within a sociocultural framework, as part of the battleground of competing social forces. We can "deconstruct" meanings rather than construct them, particularly when that means helping to bring about important cultural change. Since cultural change is of great importance, we can also look at texts that are not considered literature in the old, high, elitist sense of the word. The focus of English studies can include popular culture. This, of course, often creates a huge disjunct between what a teacher can study in college and what has been the historical norm within a local public school curriculum. But it has been one other way in which the activities of the discipline of English take us further away from

the direct study of language. The text is often thought of as a stepping-off point for a critical response which may be thought of as more important than the text.

In addition to these lines of interest, we would need to add composition, which has become an emerging field of its own within the last few decades. The roots of this are in the Process movement, which was essentially an attempt to root the study of writing in a study of what writers actually do when they write. The old model of composition, that a student should narrow a topic, select a thesis, write an outline, write a draft following the outline, and then correct the surface errors in the writing, was shown to be faulty precisely because it is far different from what successful writers report about their writing experience. For Donald Murray, now retired from the University of New Hampshire (see especially A Writer Teaches Writing, 1968), the key insight has been that writing is both discovery and revision, and that revising is not at all a matter of "correcting' writing, but a matter of bringing ideas into form and into clearer focus, for the writer as well as the reader. Error-focused attention to writing emphasized product over process. A great deal of attention was then devoted to ways, other than correctness, that a text could be successful (see especially Elbow, 1973, and Macrorie, 1980), with some sense that this can only happen when an attention to grammar is somewhat held in abeyance.

A great deal of effort was made to establish composition as an important discipline in its own right, and the notion of correcting grammar or correcting texts as central activity had to be dismissed before a more professional ground could be established for the field. Murray has collected thousands of comments by writers about the nature of their craft as a sort of informal research. This was followed up more systematically by writing researchers, like Janet Emig (1971), Sondra Pearl (1979) and Nancy Sommers (1980, 1982), who focused attention on the contrasting, composing processes of inexperienced writers. Inexperienced writers, according to Sommers, "decide to stop revising when they decide that they have not violated any of the rules for revising....In general, students will subordinate the demands of the specific problems of the text to the demands of the rules" (1980, p. 383). Experienced writers, on the other hand, see changes as "part of the process of discovering meaning altogether" (1980, p. 385 [emphasis hers]). In research on teacher comments and their effects, Sommers reported that error focused comments "can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text.... Such comments give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion...The comments create the concern that these 'accidents' of discourse need to be attended to before the meaning of the text is attended to" (1982, pp. 149-50).

A process approach to composition, then, which seemed far more grounded in what writers actually do and was establishing itself as a research-grounded approach, also positioned itself as opposed to the usual over-emphasis on error (which was and continues to be a somewhat mainstream notion of grammar.)

That writing should be approached as "process", not "product", is now a central consensus within the field, though process practitioners came under some fire in the Eighties for presenting good writing as a sort of generic product, without sufficient attention to the cultural/political issues at stake or varying requirements of various

disciplines. It is hard to sum this up in a paragraph or two, but much attention was directed to issues of "empowerment" in writing, and the problem of helping non-mainstream students adjust to the university was approached as a cultural adjustment (Bartholomae, 1980; Rose, 1980; Giroux, 1992; among others.) This also meant that the nature of good writing should be seen as differing enormously from situation to situation and from purpose to purpose. In many institutions, there has been a movement away from the generic, Freshman English class and toward a "writing across the disciplines" program, in part in recognition of the usefulness of writing in the learning process, in part because learning to write within a discipline is an important part of participating in the discipline.

There is also a widespread distrust of single-test assessments, especially when outside of context, and a fairly strong consensus for portfolio assessment (a range of writing projects over time) as the best way to assess the relative maturity or proficiency of a writer. Assessment is thought of as inherently local (and contextual). Tests in standard English have been shown to have a rather eccentric correlation with holistically assessed samples, largely because surface-feature error isn't in direct relation to higher-order, rhetorical concerns. This puts the National Council of Teachers of English in direct opposition to mainstream testing practices, including recent changes in the SAT to include a writing sample. In the words of Bob Yagelski, who chaired a recent NCTE task force: "What will matter most to students is performing well on the specific kind of writing task on the new SAT. Inevitably, in preparing for that test, other vital kinds of writing will be ignored or devalued" (Anon, 2005, p. 1). It is interesting that the task force, largely by choice, ignored the issue of grammar testing now part of the SAT, perhaps because it is not an area of expertise. Grammar is thought of as unimportant, and it would seem that questions about grammar are not thought of as real questions about writing.

It is interesting, too, that writing within the disciplines has not generated a technical literature. There are certainly discourse conventions (such as a Review of the Literature in the Social Sciences) and citation conventions that get covered in various manuals. But there is very little observation of the sort of syntactic conditions that need to occur before someone can write comfortably within a technical discipline (or even comfortably read those texts.) One exception to that has been a small group, under the influence of Peter Elbow, interested in "Enlisting the Virtues of Speech" for writing (to use Elbow's phrasing for it) (Elbow, 2005). Trying to be more articulate about the technical differences between spoken and written language has led to a more technical understanding of language, including concepts more current in Australia (by way of Halliday). Because grammar is generally thought of in highly reductive, error-focused terms, its role within effective discourse has largely been ignored. In the general ignorance about and ignoring of grammar that pervades the field, there is little awareness of functional options, and little knowledge of the genre focused approaches being worked out in Australia.

In composition, of course, grammar cannot be wished away, and there has been a troubling and troubled relationship to it over the decades. Many people have been

attracted to the field precisely because it gives them an opportunity to help people produce important kinds of texts. Teaching WRITING seems fundamentally so much more important than simply policing people's mistakes. On the other hand, students do write texts and texts need to achieve certain "standards", at least in the public mind. There is and has been resistance to a notion of writing that reduces it to correctness. At the same time, there is an uncomfortable sense that correctness issues can't simply be wished away.

Both 4 C's (The Conference on College Composition and Communication) and NCTE have tended to take what they see as progressive positions on these issues. One is the position that every child is entitled to his/her home language and to have that home language respected within school. The other is the resolution, addressed elsewhere in this paper, that there is no evidence that formal instruction in grammar has any effect on reducing error in student writing. Part of that, also, is the notion that time spent on grammar would be time better spent on actual reading and writing. This is closely tied to Whole Language approaches to language acquisition, and those are heavily influenced by generative grammar and the theoretical positions of Noam Chomsky.

One very influential occurrence of that progressive view is in the work of Constance Weaver, especially in *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996), which can be thought of as making the case for minimalist attention to grammar at around the time the practice of largely ignoring grammar was found faulty in England. If grammar can't be wished away, perhaps we can make it as small a distraction as possible. That' is partly made possible by a recognition that we acquire language naturally and easily in a language-rich environment. If we think of grammar as "the functional command of sentence structures that enable us to comprehend and produce language", then "we do not need to teach grammar at all: the grammar of our native language is what we learn in acquiring that language" (1996, p. 2). Weaver dismisses fairly quickly the notion that conscious understanding of these forms would help, largely by citing studies that purport to show that attempts to teach formal grammar are failures. She does acknowledge the need for a student to master the principles of standard written English, but believes this can be done with a minimum of terminology and minimum of intervention. "Only a very few of the frequently occurring errors in the Connors-Lunsford study and only a few of the status marking, very serious, or serious errors in Hairston's study require for their elimination an understanding of grammatical concepts commonly taught. And these few kinds of errors can be understood by comprehending only a few grammatical concepts" (p. 115). She does present a somewhat comprehensive "scope" for grammar instruction, but emphasizes that there is no one-size-fits-all sequence for the presentation of these, and advocates individualized intervention (for the elimination of error) or occasional "minilessons" for larger groups of students or for a whole class.

Perhaps the main weakness in Weaver's approach is the lack of accountability within the system and in the progressive diminution of knowledge it brings about over time. There is no way of blaming the teacher for not teaching grammar when it has already been proven that teaching grammar is harmful. The fault then lies within the students' failure to somehow soak it up from exposure or from the teacher's non-technical remarks. Or

perhaps, because everyone grows at their own pace, that student is simply on a path that will lead them toward maturity somewhere down the road. Unfortunately, some of those students, unschooled in an understanding of grammar, become English teachers in their own right. Even if they have become writers not prone to error, they do not carry into teaching a deep grounding in knowledge of the language. Editing student writing becomes more a matter of what "feels right." They don't have the knowledge base necessary to put the quirks of prescriptive grammar into perspective. They don't see a connection between formal choices and rhetorical effect.

Typically, a student entering college in the US may or may not have considerable error in their written work, but will almost certainly not have a metalanguage available to talk about that. Since the emphasis is on behaviour (error avoidance) and not on knowledge, it is difficult to intervene and difficult to know who or what to blame for that situation.

Linguistics in the US has been largely in the shadow of Chomsky for some time, though certainly not exclusively so. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his ideas have held sway in progressive education, and they have held sway despite being largely unconcerned about public language and education. They cast prescriptive grammar in doubt, but don't offer a practical alternative. One pedagogical spin-off, Sentence Combining, has had some proponents, but has never evolved into a comprehensively used system. Some, like Weaver, cite research that indicates some effectiveness for it, but this is often to disparage other, more traditional approaches as "unproven". "O'Hare's research suggested that sentence combining alone can enhance syntactic maturity and writing quality, without grammatical terminology or the study of grammar" (1996, p. 13). The problem, of course, is in defining "syntactic maturity" or "writing quality." If we assume, like Hudson and Walmsley (2005, as stated earlier), that "language is more effective the better it is understood,...that school-leavers should understand how language works.... that the understanding must include some of the technicalities of grammar - language for talking about language" - then we cannot be content with a system that leaves language-users largely unconscious of their own syntactic repertoire.² The current emphasis is on behaviour, not on knowledge. And behaviour seems measured in availability of forms (regardless of how put to use) and avoidance of traditional error.

An interesting perspective on all this is given in Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (2000), a successful and much-praised attempt to present a generative linguist's perspectives to the mainstream. In so doing, he reflects the reasons why the dominant linguistic grammar (generative) and the dominant pedagogical grammar (prescriptive) are fundamentally at odds.

The complexity of language, from the scientist's point of view, is part of our biological birthright; it is not something that parents teach their children or something that must be elaborated in school....A preschooler's tacit knowledge of grammar is more sophisticated than the thickest style manual or the most state-of-the-art computer language system... (p. 6).

² See footnote 1.

Prescriptive rules are useless without the more fundamental rules that create the sentences....These rules are never mentioned in the style manuals or school grammar because the authors correctly assume that anyone capable of reading the manuals must already have the rules....when a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery needed to arrange words into ordinary sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential little decorations. The very fact that they have to be drilled shows that they are alien to the natural workings of the language system (p. 384).

This perspective seems, on the surface at least, to support a minimalist approach to instruction about language. Language is learned naturally, and this "alien" type of language, labeled a "prescriptive rule" should, one might think, be passed on with as little attention as possible. Since the rule is essentially a behaviour (like most language use), there is no need to be conscious of it as long as it's not a behavioural problem. If it ain't broke, we don't need to fix it. The problem, though, is that the prescriptivists seem to have "blind spots", including "a gross underestimation of the linguistic wherewithal of the common person" and "complete ignorance of the modern science of language" (pp. 412-413).

In his "Language Mavens" chapter, Pinker takes the prescriptivists delightfully to task. "But once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous" (p. 387). "This is the kind of terror that has driven the prescriptive grammar market in the United States during the last century" (p. 388). He takes on nine rules altogether, splitting infinitives, using double negatives, converting nouns into verbs, and so on. But does this mean that we can dismiss prescriptive rules entirely? "Most standard English is just that, standard, in the same sense that certain units of currency or household voltage are said to be standard....people should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard one in society and to employ it in many formal settings" (p. 414). But he comes out against using scientifically inaccurate (and demeaning) terms like "bad grammar" or "fractured syntax" or even "incorrect usage" when referring to rural and black dialects (p. 414).

One goal worth striving for is "clarity and style of written prose", which Pinker says is best accomplished through concerns for one's readers and a willingness to revise extensively. "In all fairness, much of the blame falls on members of my profession for being so reluctant to apply our knowledge to the practical problems of style and usage and to everyone's curiosity about why people talk the way they do" (p. 413). Pinker seems to be calling for an approach to grammar that brings scientific attention to bear on the production of effective text, but also seems to admit, throughout the book, that his own brand of "scientific" language hasn't interested itself in those tasks. What it has done is put much prescriptive grammar into question while creating the impression that grammar is learned rather than taught. These two positions together have been cornerstones in the progressive anti-grammar movement, which often sees itself as freeing us up from the regressive and unscientific approaches of the past.

A recent text that continues in this tradition is Edgar Schuster's *Breaking the Rules:* Liberating Writers through Innovative Grammar Instruction (2003). Like Pinker, Schuster debunks many of the "mythrules" that imprison us as writers. For rules that

seem to have some credibility, he offers mini-lessons and soft explanations, without the burden of a metalanguage or complex terminology.

An interesting counter-argument to minimalist approaches has been presented by Laura Micciche (2004) in a recent issue of College Composition and Communication. She reiterates the old arguments "against teaching formal grammar, particularly forceful since the rise of process pedagogies," which criticize its tendency to "reduce time spent on higher order concerns like invention and arrangement" and includes the prevailing progressive view that "if students can't articulate their ideas in a comprehensible form, correct grammar does nothing to improve their writing" (p. 720). "Grammar instruction", at least as it was understood at the time of its demise, "is decidedly not sexy but school marmish, not empowering but disempowering, not rhetorical but decontextualized, not progressive, but remedial" (p. 718). But this reductive understanding of grammar is not at all the only possibility, and not a particularly true or useful one. She takes pains to show a strong connection between language awareness and empowerment. She presents attention to grammar as essential to formation of meaning. "We need a discourse about grammar that does not retreat from the realities we face in the classroom – a discourse that takes seriously the connection between writing and thinking, the interwoven relationship between what we say and how we say it" (p. 718). We should "encourage students to view writing as material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively relayed or effortlessly produced" (p. 719).

There seems to be a rising movement, if not by any means a majority, then, that is coming to understand the highly factionalized nature of the forces arrayed against each other concerning questions of grammar. We cannot fully reintegrate grammar until we find good reasons for it, and these can't include any sense that students will acquire an unconscious fluency from direct instruction or that they need to be taught that their home languages are "faulty" or "wrong." Perhaps it will come from a deep recognition that general ignorance of grammar allows prescriptivists to impose nonsensical mandates and allows test-makers and test-takers to focus primarily on superficial error in language use. Even more than that, though, there needs to be an attention to a grammar that offers something highly productive of its own, perhaps an ability to interpret the complex nuances of meaning within a text, an attention to a grammar that runs very much in harmony with the higher order concerns of the progressive educators who are now understandably highly skeptical about letting the grammar cat back out of the bag. It should not place limits or constraints on the evolution of effective discourse, but open doors and offer opportunities. The expectation is that this evolving approach will treat grammar as a meaning-making system and pay careful attention to rhetorical choices made in the creation of effective text (both in reading and writing), and that in doing so, it will draw on all relevant linguistic grammars, including generative, functional, and cognitive grammars, and that it will include advocacy for thoughtfully selected technical terminology. There already seems a consensus for this in ATEG, which should result in scope and sequence recommendations by this coming (2006) summer and in an alternative to NCTE's current official position against the teaching of formal grammar. The group seems committed to doing that, even if it continues to do so counter to official NCTE positions.

The largest hurdle for substantial change is and will continue to be an appalling lack of training for teachers and prospective teachers. In many places, teacher training includes a single survey course in linguistics, which is not nearly sufficient to cover syntax in any kind of comprehensive way. At best, students are given a few examples of what a "scientific" grammar (often generative) is all about. They learn that all dialects are rule-driven, but not the nature of those rules. They are then placed in teaching situations where they are expected to help students master the standard without feeling that their home languages are "wrong." They need to prepare students to read and write critically and effectively while preparing them for highly reductive standardized tests. There is a colossal disjunct between the specialized understanding of the college classroom and the expectations placed on teachers in our public schools, and they are not even well equipped to understand the nature of the problem.

We may never achieve a consensus of support for immodest proposals, but we will aim to improve on current British practices. A recent review by Johanna Rubba of the National Literacy Strategy: Grammar for Writing in ATEG's *Syntax in The Schools* sees it as "a giant step in the right direction" (and a huge improvement over "not teaching grammar at all"), but faulty in two key ways: "the minimalist 'grammar as needed' approach and the failure to connect sentence grammar to text" (2002, p. 7). We would aim at a program embracing deep and wide knowledge of grammar as highly useful, perhaps proclaiming that ignorance of grammar is far more limiting than knowledge, that it creates a vacuum within which dysfunctional prescriptive norms are enforced. We would aim for a program that values home languages as the foundation for the evolution of a highly effective writing voice. What our students know already is much too deep to be taught, and we cannot afford to foster distrust. We need to get down to the business of helping them put that fine instrument to work in the creation of a range of effective texts, using a conscious understanding of language as an important adjunct in that process.

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